


## Chapter 2

# Utilizing Specially Designed, Instructional Evidence– Based Practices and Family Engagement: Increasing African American Student Achievement in Digital Literacies

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### ABSTRACT

*Special education has the enhanced capacity to address digital literacies and storytelling, especially as parents become instrumental in the delivery of education through technology. While increasing digital opportunities for interventions and supports for students with learning exceptionalities must be a focus and consideration to improve students' outcomes, there still must be a certain level of sense-making for parents and legal guardians—particularly to strengthen student outcomes. Special educators are well positioned to help lead the work of transforming the relationships between themselves and parents. This chapter briefly explores the history of special education and race, family engagement, evidence-based practices, and opportunities to ensure that special educators help create conversations that lead to actionable opportunities to enhance and improve parent implemented interventions to incorporate families of color in the implementation of digital literacies and digitized platforms of teaching and learning.*

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## INTRODUCTION

Many African American students are faced with compulsory instructional challenges while matriculating through their public education experience (Cunningham & Swanson, 2010). Those students who also have a special needs designation may have additional challenges (Gardner & Miranda, 2001)). Because of the disproportionate intersections between race and specialized instruction, there is a need to think about the cultural significance and specific supports and interventions that will allow students of color, in particular, with the opportunities for specially designed instruction for the betterment of academic success (Skiba, Poloni-Staudinger, Simmons, Feggins-Azziz, & Chung, 2005). Now, especially due to an ever-increasing need to provide clear and meaningful digital literacy opportunities for marginalized students who have specialized education learning programs and plans, there has to be an integrative approach by which we enhance student-learning in digital spaces—for academia and the workforce (Sousa & Rocha, 2019). Globally, and because of the ever-increasing need to think more broadly and rightly at the convergence between schools and homes as places of increased learning, in this country, we must begin to engage and empower parents of marginalized students to become more comfortable and knowledgeable about digital learning tools and digital literacies available to students (Epstein, 2018; Wilhelmsen & Sørensen, 2019; Tour, 2019).

There are a variety of ways in which African American students, particularly those who may have been made eligible for specialized instruction services, can be supported for successful school outcomes, especially when reimagining the role of parents and legal guardians in the educational process. Traditionally, parent engagement is one such way and it has been defined in many ways (Epstein, 1995, Fan & Chen, 2001; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997). This paper utilizes Epstein's (1995) conceptualization of parent engagement and the dual-capacity framework for family-school partnerships (Mapp & Kuttner, 2019). The dual-capacity framework (see Figure 1) asks us to look at the challenge of schools and families working together from a skills and/or dispositional perspective. The next phase is examining the conditions of opportunity for students classified as special education and their families, specifically focusing on those opportunities linked to learning as Mapp and Kuttner's (2013) model challenges us to utilize partnerships in ways that support student achievement and school improvement.

## A BRIEF BACKGROUND OF SPECIAL EDUCATION AND RACE

The history of African American students in specialized education programs and settings is connected by two often recurring themes: litigation and disproportionality. Special education programs involving students of color have been once recorded as programs centered on the moral training of African-American children designed to help them behave appropriately by indoctrinating and training students to a majority-value system, mostly insisting upon compliance (Cremin, 1967). As far back as 1893, there were court rulings that substantiated the philosophy of excluding students with differences and disabilities. The Massachusetts Supreme Court upheld the expulsion of a student solely based on poor academic ability (Yell, Rogers, & Rogers, 1998), and, later, excluding students with disabilities from a free appropriate public-school education was further legitimized with the *separate but equal* ruling established by *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896), even though it has been dutifully noted that education in the Jim Crow period was certainly not equal (Jackson & Weidman, 2006). After nearly 60 years, *Brown v. Board of Education of*

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